



Brazilian Cinema Today

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NOTES

1. W.A. Shurecliff. *Bombs at Bikini. The Official Report of Operation Crossroads*. New York, 1947. pp. 151-52.
2. Terry Riley. *RAINBOW IN CURVED AIR*, Columbia Records, New York.
3. Rosalind Krauss. *Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism*. October, Spring, 1976, New York. Krauss acknowledges that the last fifteen years of art writing has not comprehensively examined a body of work "which conflates psychologistic and formal means to achieve very particular ends. The art of Robert Rauchenberg is a case in point."
4. Philip Leider. "Bruce Conner: A New Sensibility," *Artforum*, Nov.-Dec. 1962.
5. In its original version, this last sequence is in color, further emphasizing or re-enforcing its positive creative triumph; Conner also prepared the film originally as a three-screen loop event, so that two supportive side panels flanked the movie as it is most often shown, and the whole length of the film was repeated several times. Conner hardly thinks of the film in any definitive or superior state, and sold the three-screen reels in 8mm so that they could be projected at 5-frame-per-second speeds with separate sounds.

RANDAL JOHNSON

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In *Tent of Miracles* (1977), Cinema Novo founder Nelson Pereira dos Santos's twelfth feature film, there is a scene in which poet/journalist/film-maker Fausto Pena tries frantically to telephone Robert Farias, real-life director of Embrafilme (the Brazilian State Film Enterprise), in order to arrange financing for the film he is making about the until-then obscure Bahian sociologist Pedro Archanjo. On the wall beside the telephone there is a poster of a David Cardoso film entitled *Loved and Violated*, a soft-core porn murder mystery released in 1976. This scene is reflective of an all too recent phase of Brazilian cinema in which the country's highly moralistic military government, through Embrafilme, was literally financing poor quality pornographic films while more serious film-makers, especially those linked to the Cinema Novo movement, were confronting an unofficial blacklisting and were having extreme difficulty financing their own projects. Many of them consequently had to look outside of Brazil for backers for their films. Like the Cinema Novo directors, Fausto Pena, with his more culturally valid film, is apparently ignored by Embrafilme.

In reality, there seem to have been changes in Embrafilme's financing policy since Roberto Farias, himself an experienced film-maker (*Assault on the Pay Train*, 1962), assumed the entity's directorship several years ago. Farias's Embr-

filme has, in fact, become a major factor in what has been called a policy of "detente" between Cinema Novo film-makers and the military regime. Nelson Pereira dos Santos evidently did not have as much trouble reaching Farias as does Fausto Pena in his film: *Tent of Miracles* was partially financed by Embrafilme.

Due to the seemingly contradictory nature of the current "rapprochement" between certain members of Cinema Novo (notably Glauber Rocha, who has recently referred to the military as the "legitimate representatives" of the Brazilian people) and the regime, heated debates have taken place over the last few years concerning the role of the state in the Brazilian film industry. Cinema Novo in general, and Glauber Rocha in particular, has been widely accused of selling out to the government and of having lost faith in the initial propositions of the movement. The position of Rocha and Cinema Novo is somewhat more understandable, however, when seen in the light of the historical evolution of the movement.¹

Cinema Novo, with its highly intellectualized films oriented toward a critical vision of Brazilian reality (i.e., underdevelopment and its causes), failed to make a significant dent in the stranglehold maintained by the multinational film corporations on the internal film market. If the "disinherited masses" were on the screen in early

Cinema Novo films (e.g., Nelson Pereira dos Santos's *Barren Lives*, 1963), they were certainly not in the audience viewing the films. After the 1964 coup, the movement turned inward toward self-criticism and analyses of the failure of the intellectual left *vis-à-vis* the military takeover (e.g., Paulo César Saraceni's *The Challenge*, 1965). At that point, the masses were neither on the screen nor in the audience. As explicitly political cinema became increasingly impossible under military rule, Cinema Novo films became more and more allegorical (e.g., Walter Lima, Jr.'s *Brazil Year 2000*, 1969), and, with the exception of Joaquim Pedro de Andrade's *Macunaima* (1969), the movie-going public—a public ideologically conditioned by years of Hollywood's products—became increasingly alienated from national cinema.

Film-makers associated with Cinema Novo realized that since they had decided to use commercial channels for the exhibition of their films, they had an absolute necessity of reaching and communicating with a broad public. Among steps taken during the late sixties was the formation, with producer Luiz Carlos Barreto, of the distribution cooperative Difilm. Films began to be made in color,² and humor was used as establishing an initial level of film/spectator communication (e.g., *Macunaima*). The problem still existed, however, that exhibition circuits were structured in such a way as to maintain foreign control of the internal market. Independent production, one of the mainstays of the Cinema Novo program, was by and large too precarious a venture to enable the films to compete successfully with the multinationals. Brazilian cinema thus began to look increasingly toward the state for protectionist measures and, eventually, direct financial support through aid in distribution and other forms of financing.

Glauber Rocha, for example, has always favored a large role for the state in Brazilian film production. In a recent article, Rocha is quoted as saying:

I think that Brazilian cinema should be controlled by the State because cinema is a cultural fact of collective interest. It cannot remain in private hands, because under capitalism private interests want only to accumulate profits by exploiting the public. It can be argued that under the difficult conditions of

censorship which Brazilian cinema endures, State control has repressed creativity. But it just so happens that there is no capitalist cinema in Brazil because the Brazilian market is occupied by foreign cinema. . . . No international film costs less than a million dollars. With that amount we can make ten films in Brazil. Private cinema, in Brazil, depends on the help of the State.³

Rocha does not seem to differentiate, however, between varying forms of governments and the implications of state control under these different forms. Surely state control in Cuba does not mean the same thing as state control in Brazil under the current regime, which has based its own economic policy on a strong role for multinational corporations.

Until recently, with the fusion of the National Institute of Cinema and Embrafilme under the leadership of Roberto Farias, government involvement was limited to protectionist legislation reserving a certain number of exhibition days for national films (now 112 days per year—up 100% over the 1963 figure of 56 days per year) and some small financial awards based largely on the "quality" and commercial success of the national product. Under Farias, Cinema Novo had an ally in Embrafilme and thus ended, to a large extent, its reluctance to accept government financing (and the government, on the other hand, apparently ended its reluctance to finance Cinema Novo participants). Film-maker, critic and Cinema Novo-advocate Gustavo Dahl (*The Brave Warrior*, 1968) is currently head of Embrafilme's distribution section and is widely considered to be a leading candidate to succeed Farias. Cinema Novo is thus, in a sense, in power, and it continues to maintain intellectual hegemony in Brazilian cinema. Many of the most important films being made today in Brazil carry names as familiar as Andrade, Guerra, Diegues, Saraceni, Dos Santos and, yes, Rocha, who is now completing his first feature since returning to Brazil in 1976.

The situation of these film-makers is nevertheless still quite contradictory. As Nelson Pereira dos Santos told me in an interview given at the 1977 New York Film Festival, where his *Tent of Miracles* was screened:

Our own work is very much linked to what we are living today. It is influenced by all sorts of daily pressures of Brazilian society—specifically on the

intellectual and all the contradictions which surround him. We receive money from the government to make films, but we do not support this kind of government. We are in fact viscerally opposed to this kind of regime. But at the same time we continue making films in an attempt to go forward according to our own initial propositions, but then we find the censors of this same government waiting for us at the corner. This type of contradiction is lived not only by film-makers, but by composers of popular music, writers—in short, by all creative artists in Brazil. The Brazilian intellectual lives through all of this and I believe that the average Brazilian also lives through it in another sense. The intellectual is conscious of the fact and reasons about his own situation, but I think that this existential circumstance is common to all Brazilians.

This problem is one of the many raised by Dos Santos himself in *Tent of Miracles*. Although the film was partially financed by Embrafilme, the director has mixed feelings about the role of the state in Brazilian cinema. In an interview granted to the newsweekly *Veja* (27 July 1977), he says that Embrafilme's current policy could go either way, toward a true realization of the development of a strong national cinema, or toward the mere protection of special interests. It is too early to tell.

There is no doubt whatsoever as to the box-office success of recent Brazilian cinema after the immense popularity of films like Carlos Diegues's *Xica da Silva* (1976).⁵ But the question must still be asked to what extent film-makers once associated with Cinema Novo have abandoned their original propositions in favor of popular success? The best way to answer this question is to examine one of the most important films of the current phase of production, Dos Santos's *Tent of Miracles*.

Considered by many to be his most important film since *Barren Lives*, *Tent of Miracles* is based on a novel by Bahian writer Jorge Amado. The film is a continuation of a project begun by Dos Santos with his previous film, *The Amulet of Ogum* (1974), in which he used Afro-Brazilian religion as a starting point in the formation of what he called, in a manifesto written to coincide with the 1974 film, a "popular cinema." In the manifesto, Dos Santos argued that films should adopt a popular point of view as a means of affirming both Brazilian cinema and Brazilian popular culture. This idea differs from the original

propositions of Cinema Novo in that it no longer tolerates the sociological distance which was common to earlier phases of the movement and which resulted in an overly intellectualized and inaccessible cinema. Rather than looking at the people from the outside and criticizing society through them, the camera should now adopt the people's point of view, to the extent possible, and criticize society from their perspective. It is an attempt to see Brazilian society as the people see it and to break away from the colonized ideas which have been imposed on the Brazilian mentality over the years. In the *Veja* interview, the director explains: "*The Amulet of Ogum* was the search for my origins—where do I come from, who are my parents, what are my roots, how do I undo the repression I have been subjected to in school, in the university?" He decided to use Afro-Brazilian religion as a starting point, since it is a sentiment which, so to speak, comes from the roots and is at the same time a cultural expression that has been repressed throughout Brazil's history by a religious form at the service of the colonizer. According to Dos Santos, "it was the first thing we used since it could give us a global vision and also a way of thinking in relation to all of Brazilian society." *Tent of Miracles*, even more than *The Amulet of Ogum*, documents the struggle of Afro-Brazilian religion against the continued repression of the Catholic church and the state. The project to develop a popular cinema in these terms has not been totally successful since the structure of the internal market has largely impeded the desired public from seeing the films. *The Amulet of Ogum* was considered by exhibitors to be an intellectual film, and was thus shown only in middle and upper-middle class areas of Brazilian cities. The director feels, however, that the film did serve the purpose of affirming *umbanda* as a valid religious practice, something that had not previously been accomplished in Brazilian cinema. *Tent of Miracles*, released in Brazil in October 1977, has been much more successful in reaching the public than was Dos Santos's previous film.

Other recent Brazilian films have also dealt with the problem of racism in that country. Carlos Diegues's *Xica da Silva* (1976) and Antunes Filho's *Time of Waiting* (1973) come immediately to mind. Diegues's film deals with racism as a secondary topic. Antunes Filho's film stays on the

level of denunciation in an extremely violent critique of racial attitudes in Brazilian society. *Tent of Miracles* goes beyond both of these films in that it deals directly with racism but does not remain on the level of criticism. Instead, it passes to a higher level of the affirmation of "minority" cultures and their contribution to the formation of modern Brazil. The final sequence of the film is a beautiful homage to the Brazilian people—a people derived from the mixture of African, Indian, and European blood. The sequence shows a procession commemorating Bahian independence passing through the streets of Salvador past an arch with the words "Independence or Death" inscribed on it. Bahia was the site, in 1823, of the only struggle for independence that Brazil witnessed, as a militia of blacks, Indians and white Brazilians fought Portuguese troops who had remained loyal to the king even after Dom Pedro's declaration of independence the year before. As the camera focuses on the faces of children moving through the streets, the significance of racial mixing for the formation (and future) of Brazilian society becomes very clear.

Tent of Miracles, with its affirmation of Brazilian popular culture, is an important step in the continued process of the decolonization of Brazilian cinema. Recent developments in that country have shown that it can compete on an equal basis with the best foreign cinema has to offer. As Roberto Farias puts it, Brazilian cinema "has ceased being a foreign product in its own market."⁶

NOTES

1. Despite the many death certificates issued for the Cinema Novo movement, the label is still useful to distinguish a certain kind of Brazilian cinema which maintains a substantially critical attitude toward society from the purely commercial cinema which is also being produced in Brazil. Many of the cineastes included in the first category are either original participants in the movement or are linked to it in other ways. My continued use of the term is in line with Nelson Pereira dos Santos, who says in an interview published in the newsweekly *Veja* (27 July 1977): "Cinema Novo has not died, because it is not an aesthetic school, but rather a method of cinematographic action, as was neo-realism. Neo-realism understood that within a capitalist society it is possible to practice, through cinema, a humanistic, transforming mode of thought. That was the great lesson of neo-realism . . . And Cinema Novo is the application of the method in Brazil."

2. Leon Hirszman's *Girl from Ipanema* (1967), with a screenplay

by Glauber Rocha, Vinícius de Moraes, Eduardo Coutinho and Hirszman, was the first film by a Cinema Novo participant to be made in color.

3. Quoted by M. Pontes in "Deus e o Diabo no tempo do exílio," *Jornal do Brasil*, 13 December 1975.

4. Eduardo Escorel edited many important Cinema Novo films (e.g., Rocha's *Land in Anguish*, Andrade's *Macunaima*, Diegues's *The Inheritors*) before directing *Lesson of Love*, his first feature film. The film, as yet unreleased in the United States, won many awards as the best Brazilian film of 1976.

5. *Dona Flor* is the largest grossing film in the history of cinema in Brazil, surpassing international films such as *Jaws*. It was produced by Luiz Carlos Barreto, whose role in the formation of Cinema Novo and in the current success of Brazilian cinema has yet to be fully appreciated in this country.

6. In *Mercado Comun do Cinema: Uma Proposta Brasileira* (Rio de Janeiro: Embrafilme, 1977), p. 7.

Reviews

TENT OF MIRACLES

Director: Nelson Pereira dos Santos. Script: Dos Santos, from a novel by Jorge Amado. Producer: Ney Sant'anna. Photography: Helio Silva. Music: Gilberto Gil, Jards Macale.

Tent of Miracles, the latest work by Brazilian writer-director Nelson Pereira dos Santos (*Vidas Secas*, *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman*) recently screened at Filmex, is one of a rare breed—a brilliant political film that succeeds in raising the consciousness of its audience and yet is thoroughly enjoyable to watch. Its appeal is multi-dimensional—it confronts us directly with ideology, moves us with its narrative through a wide range of emotions, amuses us with satire, both blatant and subtle, dazzles us with visuals, stirs us with sambas, baffles us with magic, catches us in stereotyped responses, and demystifies the Brazilian social structure. The film develops a consciousness that is painfully aware of the pervasive injustice, corruption and hype and yet, instead of righteously denouncing all characters who are in any way tainted with these vices or cynically rejecting all values and efforts because they are limited, it powerfully affirms human life and perceptively evaluates various positive steps that can be taken to build a better world. Its comprehensive social analysis is combined with a